

Throwing Large Plates and Platters

by Samuel L. Hoffman

Ceramic plates and platters are some of the most functionally useful forms you can make. They also provide wonderful surfaces for artistic expression and creativity. However, the process of creating a plate or platter does not merely entail squashing a piece of clay into a flat disc. In fact, when subjected to the high temperatures of glaze firing, a poorly crafted platter will inevitably crack, warp, or deform in some manner. Here are several different techniques for throwing and trimming that help eliminate some of the problems inherent to making large plates and platters.



(Top) Stoneware plate, 12 inches in diameter, reduction fired in a gas kiln, carbon-trap shino glaze with wax resist brushwork.

(Bottom) Porcelain platter, 24 inches in diameter, wood fired in the Kent State University (Ohio) anagama, natural ash glaze and atmospheric flashing.

Throwing a Platter from a Single Ball of Clay

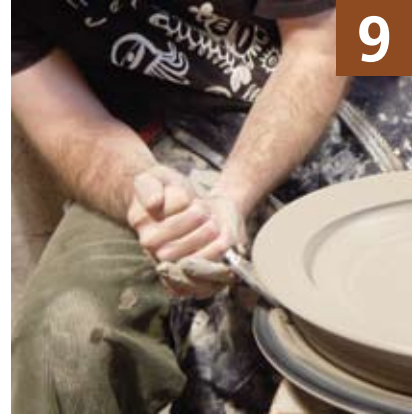


It's relatively easy to throw a large plate (up to 15 inches) from a single ball of clay. When making plates, it's advisable to use clay that is slightly wetter than when throwing vertically oriented pieces. First, wedge a large bit of clay (6-8 lbs.), taking care to eliminate any air pockets that may be present.

Pound the clay into a ball and slap it down onto a clean, dry bat that is mounted on the wheel head (figure 1). Wet the clay and begin centering with both hands opposite each other, compressing the clay into the shape of a cone. When the cone of clay is basically on center, begin pressing

down on the top with the fingers or palm of one hand, while keeping the sides centered with the other hand (figure 3). Make sure to keep the clay surface well lubricated with water, as dry spots can produce asymmetries or irregularities that will be emphasized during firing. Keep compressing the clay until it nears the edge of the bat (figure 4).

When you have established the approximate diameter of the plate, use a sponge to compress the clay from the center to the edge, going back and forth several times, smoothing out the surface (figure 5). Some potters like to further compress and



flatten the plate with the use of a wooden or rubber rib (figure 6).

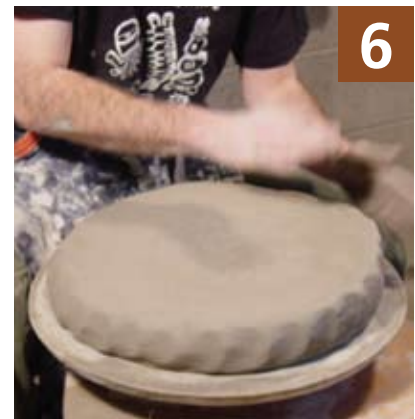
Now that the general shape of the plate is established, it is time to finish the rim. Compress the rim while raising it slightly above the surface of the plate (figure 7). Carefully throw the rim into the desired shape, taking care not to make it too thin to support its own weight. Remember, excess clay can always be removed in the trimming stage (figure 8).

Using a sponge, clean up the plate and remove any slurry that has built up. Take a wooden knife and carefully cut a 45° angle into the foot of the plate to allow for easier cut-off and trimming (figure 9). Unless you use plaster bats for throwing, which do not require cut-off, pulling a wire tool under a large plate can be one of the trickiest parts of the process. A cut-off wire naturally raises up in the middle of a plate, creating a thin spot that can develop a warp or crack. Rather than cutting the piece off by pulling a wire under the base in a single motion, break it up into two steps. First, use a wire tool lon-



ger than the diameter of the plate. Then, before moving the wire to the far side of the plate, pull the wire several inches under the front side of the plate (nearest your lap) while the wheel is spinning (figure 10). This should free the outside edge of the plate from the bat. Remove the wire, then move it to the far side of the plate and pull it all the way under the plate as the wheel spins. By initially cutting several inches under the plate, there is less drag when you pull the wire completely through (figure 11), preventing the wire from raising up and cutting off too much from the middle of the plate.

Throwing a Platter from Several Balls of Clay



As the size of a platter increases, it becomes more difficult to center the large amount of clay from a single ball. Instead of using one 15 lb. ball of clay, wedge up two or three 4-6 lb. pieces. Place the first ball on a bat in the same manner as described above, but do not wet the clay (figure 1). While the wheel is slowly turning, use a slapping motion with both hands on opposite sides of the clay to center the ball without flattening it out too much. Next, slam the second ball of clay down on the first and re-center the mound using the same rhythmic slapping (figure 2).

When this process is repeated with the third ball (figure 3), it becomes evident that quite a large amount of clay can be centered with minimal physical exertion. After all of the clay has been slap-centered into a cone, begin pounding the center of the clay and flattening it into a disc (figure 4). Remember, at this point the wheel is still spinning slowly and no water has been used (figure 5). Using soft clay, it is possible to pound the clay all the way out to the edge of the bat, keeping it centered with the rhythmic slapping of both hands (figure 6).



As soon as the clay is flattened and centered, use a wet sponge to smooth out the surface and compress the platter (figure 7).

When throwing a large platter, it becomes difficult to estimate the thickness of the base. It is important to leave enough clay for a well-trimmed foot ring. If necessary, insert a needle tool into the center of the platter to determine how thick the base is (figure 8).

Finish the rim in the same manner as described above, taking care to leave enough clay to support the rim's weight. Smooth and clean up the surface of the platter with a

sponge (figure 9). Make a 45° bevel into the foot and cut off the platter using the same two-step process described before (figure 10).

Like any ceramic process, this throwing technique takes practice to master. However, the potential for using these large forms as ceramic canvases for artistic expression makes plates and platters some of the most exciting pieces a potter can make.

Trimming a Large Platter



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Before trimming, it is important to slowly dry the platter under plastic to avoid uneven stiffness.

While some problems inherent with making plates and platters are eliminated in the throwing stage other problems are mitigated during trimming stage. Due to the large size of platters, they undergo a significant amount of stress during the firing process. Although it is possible to make a successful platter that is not trimmed, the strongest way to finish a piece involves creating a foot ring. Trimming compresses the underside of a platter making it less susceptible to cracking. Additionally, foot rings allow you to glaze both sides of the platter, creating a very

strong glaze/clay/glaze finish. However, when dealing with platters of large scale, it becomes increasingly difficult to flip and trim the piece without distorting it.

When the clay is leather hard, and leaving the platter on the bat, place a sponge, towel, or other soft object in the center to prevent the center from slumping during trimming (figure 1). Carefully place a large bat on top of the rim of the platter (figure 2). Support the platter with one hand underneath the bottom bat and place one hand on top (figure 3).



In one smooth motion, flip the platter while sandwiching it between both hands (figure 4). Place the bottom bat onto the wheelhead and remove the top bat to expose the underside of the platter (figure 5). Use three soft balls of clay to hold the platter down on the large bat, taking care not to deform the rim (figure 6).

Using a sharp trimming tool, begin removing clay from the outside edge of the platter (figure 7). Finish trimming the outer edge of the foot, establishing the diameter of the foot ring (figure 8).

Establish the inside edge of the large foot ring, then begin trimming the small foot in the center of the platter, tapping the clay to listen for the thickness of the base. Finish the inside foot and continue removing clay until the desired thickness is achieved (figure 9). Finish trimming the outside foot and clear away loose clay (figure 10).

Smooth both foot rings with a damp sponge, taking care not to wet the clay too much (figure 11).

Trimming Platters with Altered Rims



Altering the circular form of a plate is an exciting means of expression for ceramic artists, but can present difficulties at the trimming stage (figure 1).

If the rim of a plate is cut or manipulated into an asymmetrical shape, or is delicate, the piece cannot simply be inverted onto another bat for trimming (figure 2). Instead, the piece must be placed on a clay chuck that supports the plate in the center. To create this chuck, form a large coil from the same clay body

that the plate was made from.

Attach the coil to the wheel head in the shape of a donut, making sure that enough height is established to hold the plate above the wheel head (figure 3).

Flatten and smooth the coil using as little water as possible, creating a rounded cushion on which to rest the plate (figure 4). It is important to let the plate stiffen up a little bit more than usual before trimming to avoid flexing or chipping the altered lip when the piece is inverted.



Leaving the plate on the bat it was thrown on, carefully flip the plate onto the palm of one hand or a small bat that fits the center of the plate (figure 5).

Place the upside-down plate onto the coil and make sure that it is centered (figure 6). Gently press down on the middle of the plate to create a vacuum that will hold the piece in place (figure 7). Start trimming by removing excess clay from the outside of the plate.

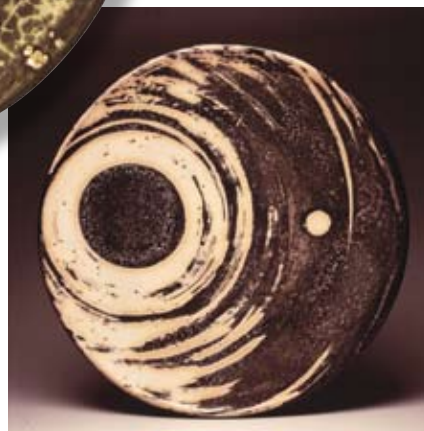
Trim the plate using the same techniques described before, taking care to avoid the delicate lip that hangs over the wheel head (figure 8). When the foot rings are trimmed, smooth the bottom of the plate and carefully remove it from the coil. If the inside surface of the plate has been marred from resting on the coil, use a sponge to clean it up.

Mounting a platter

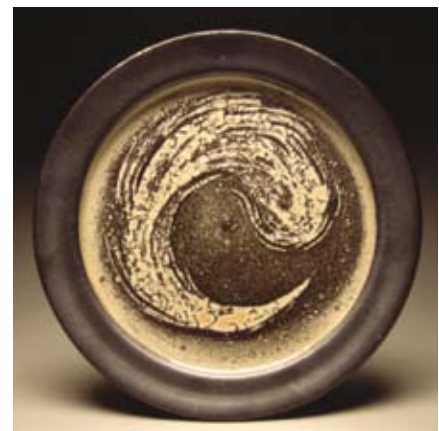


Although plates and platters are traditionally used horizontally for serving on a table, they can be prepared for hanging on the wall (figure 1). One technique is to punch holes into the outer foot ring that can later be used for hanging with wire or string. Use one hole if you want to determine the orientation of the platter. Pierce several holes to allow the owner of the piece to determine the best way to hang it.

Another method of preparing a platter for hanging is to attach a simple coil of clay as a loop at the top of the piece, taking care that it does not protrude below the foot ring when the piece is sitting flat (figure 2). This clay loop can be hung directly on a nail or can be used to attach a wire or string to the platter for mounting. It is possible to purchase prefabricated plate hangers, but most of these protrude over the edge of the piece, creating a visual distraction that takes away from the integrity of the rim.



Porcelain platter, 17 inches in diameter, reduction fired in a gas kiln, carbon-trap shino glaze with wax resist brushwork.



Porcelain platter, 22 inches in diameter, reduction fired in a gas kiln, carbon-trap shino glaze with wax resist brushwork.